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ABSTRACT

For many years, Arizona State University (ASU) allowed its basic writers into its standard English (ENG) 101 course, only after they took ENG 071, a remedial class offered by a local community college. However, it soon became obvious to English Department faculty that the remedial grammar-focused class was not giving this group of students the help, background, and writing experiences they needed to produce rhetorically effective college-level compositions. In the fall of 1992, ASU's English department piloted what it called the "stretch" program, a 2-semester sequence of classes designed to give beginning writers more time to move into the university community. The stretch program, in essence, stretches the standard ENG 101 course over 2 semesters to give beginning writers more time to work on and revise and think about their writing. Instead of doing all the ENG 101 assignments in one semester, they do three papers each semester, each with multiple drafts, along with a portfolio analysis of their writing as a final examination. The first class in the stretch sequence is a pass/fail course, but the grades students earn on the papers go on to count toward 50% of their ENG 101 grade. Results show that more students are staying at ASU for ENG 101 than before, and more are passing ENG 101 than before. Retention in the spring and summer semesters is not as good as retention in the fall, but the stretch program is significantly better than the old system. (TB)

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ED 403 558

Bringing Them Home: Arizona State University's New Model of Basic Writing Instruction

Gregory R. Glau

For many years and like many other institutions, before ASU allowed its "basic writers" into its standard ENG 101 course, the university insisted they take ENG 071, a "remedial" class offered by a local community college. However, it soon became obvious to the Department of English faculty that the "remedial" grammar-focused class was not giving this group of students the help and background and writing experiences they needed to produce rhetorically effective college-level compositions. What P. G. Perrin wrote more than a half-century ago still was true with ENG 071: the drill-and-fill grammar exercises of "remedial" classes, Perrin said, "violate the lone principle that present teachers of composition have salvaged from the 2,500 years of the discipline of rhetoric, that one learns to speak and write by speaking and writing." ASU's faculty recognized that students were being charged university-level course fees for a non-university class they did not receive credit for . . . while the community college controlled both the curriculum and the level of instruction.

In the fall of 1992 ASU's Department of English piloted what it called the *Stretch Program*--a two-semester sequence of classes designed to give beginning writers more time to move into the university community. This new program was ASU's way of including basic writers in its curriculum, a change from seeing and talking of these students as defective to one that, as Mina Shaughnessy taught us, sees that "students write the way they do, not because they are slow or non-verbal,

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indifferent to or incapable of academic excellence, but because they are beginners and must, like all beginners, need to start at the beginning."

Let me start, then, with what the ***Stretch Program* is**: In essence, the *Stretch Program* "stretches" the standard ENG 101 course over two semesters. Our whole idea is to give these beginning writers more time to work on and revise and think about their writing, so instead of doing all the ENG 101 assignments in one semester, they do three papers each semester, each with multiple drafts, along with a portfolio analysis of their writing as a final examination.

Stretch students use the same textbook that regular ENG 101 classes work with (currently St. Martin's Guide to Writing), and write the same assignments as "regular" ENG 101 students compose, and in effect, because they do have more time, *Stretch* students actually do more reading and writing than their ENG 101 counterparts.

Students currently place into *Stretch* or into ENG 101 based on their ACT or SAT scores. Each semester, we also offer several sections of *Stretch Program* classes for international students, for these students especially benefit from more time to work on their writing.

The first class in the *Stretch* sequence carries the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum label WAC 101. The "WAC" designation connects the class to a new ASU department that focuses solely on undergraduate education and which reports directly to the Provost. Therefore, even if the course is seen as "remedial," as so many basic writing programs are, this connection to the Writing Across the Curriculum program provides some political protection.

The first class in the *Stretch* sequence, WAC 101, is a pass/fail course and students who pass get 3 hours of elective credit that counts toward graduation at ASU. But while students do not receive a formal grade for their WAC 101 class, the grades they earn in the class (for their papers and other work) accumulate and count as 50% of their ENG 101 grade. When they pass WAC 101, students get a ticket to ENG 101 and their WAC 101 class has no impact on their GPA, but if they fail, they receive an "E" which lowers their GPA.

Following their WAC 101 semester, students who pass go into a *Stretch Program* version of ENG 101, usually with the same instructor, group of students, and even the same classroom; when they pass ENG 101, they receive 3 hours of English credit and will, of course, like all ASU students, go on to take ENG 102.

We were initially concerned that many students would be unable for some reason (they got a job, perhaps) to take the "linked" section of ENG 101 and would have to be moved to another class. This concern turned out to be false, however, as so far less than 1 percent of our students have had scheduling difficulties from one semester to the next. One problem we did not anticipate concerned instructor continuity when a Faculty Associate, a part-time adjunct who taught two WAC 101 classes, decided to not return the following semester. Consequently, those two groups of students lost the sense of continuity and community that comes from keeping the same instructor with the same group of students over two semesters. Some 6% of *Stretch Program* students report that being with the same instructor over two

semesters is the "best thing" about the program, so we are working harder to try to keep instructors and students together for the whole year.

We've now had the program in operation for two full years. Basically, we were quite pleased with the fall--spring sequence of classes, somewhat less pleased with the spring--fall sequence, and disappointed with the summer classes.

We've averaged about 600 students each of the last three fall semesters--about 1 in 5 of those taking their first composition class at ASU are in the *Stretch Program*. Naturally, a percentage of the students who start in the fall with WAC 101 do not subsequently register for ENG 101 in the spring (they fail or withdraw or pass, but did not return for ENG 101). Our WAC 101 --> ENG 101 "retention" rate has averaged 82% for the past two academic years. That is, we've managed to retain four out of every five students who started the *Stretch Program* for both academic years. As a comparison, only about two-thirds of those students who take ENG 101 in the fall also take ENG 102 the following spring. Our "retention rate," for whatever reason, is about 15 percentage points higher in *Stretch* than in "regular" ENG 101.

Compared to what we used to do (ENG 071 followed by ENG 101), more *Stretch* students stay here at ASU for ENG 101 than ENG 071 students did; more *Stretch* students pass ENG 101 than used to, and early indications are that more students go on to take and to pass ENG 102 than did with our former model.

Our results for those students who started in the spring were not as good. In the spring of 1995 and again in 1996, we offered several sections of WAC 101, with the intention of offering corresponding sections of ENG 101 in the fall. However, we

lost about 50 percent of our students . . . and while we expected that we wouldn't retain as many as the fall-spring sequence, I didn't think we'd lose almost half of those who started the program. Our summer loss rate was about the same--50 percent.

However, even at that, by way of comparison, for the past three academic years, only about one-third of the students who took ENG 101 in the spring also took ENG 102 the next fall, so perhaps our 50% "loss rate" is not too high, after all.

Finally, I'd like to draw an informal picture of the students in the *Stretch Program*, by comparing them to their ENG 101 counterparts. For the two years we have complete data on, Arizona residents made up a slightly higher percentage of *Stretch* students than do out-of-state students. Since ASU's admission requirements are lower for Arizona residents than they are for out-of-state students, we would expect to find more Arizona students in the *Stretch Program*.

I also think that perhaps both educational background and a testing bias shows up in the number of minority students we serve, as the *Stretch Program* also had higher percentages of ethnic minority students than did ENG 101, for Asian, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. Overall, students from underrepresented groups (during the two years for which we have complete data) make up about 19 percent of all ENG 101 students, while about 36 percent of *Stretch Program* students come from underrepresented groups.

Near the end of the spring semesters in both 1995 and 1996, we asked students in the *Stretch Program* to complete an anonymous evaluation of the program. We received responses from about half of *Stretch Program* students--about 700 completed

surveys. This group expressed overwhelming satisfaction with the WAC 101--ENG 101 sequence of classes: 84 percent indicated that their writing had improved over the course of the program. Most of these (51 percent) felt their writing had gotten better because they had more time to spend on their papers. Other reasons mentioned including having the same teacher (6% of respondents), one-on-one help and small classes (6 percent; our *Stretch Program* classes are capped at 22 students), and working with the same students for peer review (4 percent).

8% of those students who responded indicated that they felt their writing had not improved. The main reason for their expressed dissatisfaction was that they felt they'd been misplaced and "would have done fine in regular ENG 101." These survey results caused us to distribute to every WAC 101 student, in the fall of 1995, a one-page outline that explains the *Stretch Program*. We also asked each instructor to give several in-class briefings to explain the program and to let students know that if they felt they were misplaced, they could speak to the program director about their placement.

Where We Plan to Go from Here

Our experience with this particular model of basic writing instruction, at least so far, indicates that the approach makes good pedagogical sense for the majority of students who place into the *Stretch Program*. Students and instructors alike express a high rate of satisfaction, primarily because of the extra writing time our model provides. At the same time, we recognize that our attempt to "do it all" during the summer was a mistake and needs to be reconfigured; we also want to keep a close

watch on our spring-fall sequence, as early indications show that we will lose (perhaps too) many students. We also want to work toward a more accurate placement mechanism, and ensure that students know who to talk with if they feel misplaced or have other problems or concerns. It is apparent that the majority of student complaints came from those students who did not really understand the program.

One key element of our approach is that the first part of the sequence, WAC 101, is more closely tied to our composition curriculum than standard "remedial" courses and is therefore better insulated from political attack. At the same time, I as director and our basic writing students enjoy the complete support of the department--which is not the case in every college or university. The faculty now allows me two-class "reassigned" time to give me the time necessary to supervise *Stretch*--including the selection of instructors, checking syllabi, observing each teacher every semester, dealing with student/instructor problems and concerns, and so on. Any institution with such a model must provide the administrative support required.

At the same time, the ESL component is growing and is aggravated by the often very late registration of international students (their situation was complicated in 1996 by the budget shutdowns of the federal government). And, of course, we are working on ways to assess our performance; while we know we are doing a better job of retaining students for their composition classes, it will be several years before we see if the *Stretch Program* is having a long-term effect on graduation rates.